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ABSTRACT

The assumptions of organizational and social reality in public school administration and their relationships to gender discrimination are explored in this paper. A critical constructivist theoretical approach is used to examine organizational elements, selection processes, roles, access to information, and visible gender in public school administration. Qualitative methodology involved collection of over one dozen vignettes that reflect the experiences of women in public education administration. The sample included aspiring administrators and practicing elementary and secondary principals, assistant principals, and superintendents. Findings point to the existence of gender discrimination in public school administration but they also point to a new construct, that of women, as well as men, being misled by the gains that have been made into not seeing the need to examine issues associated with gender discrimination. The importance of the study is the introspection it invites, the learning it enhances, and the evolution and awakening of constructions of the inner eye it enables. People, if they can see differently, can believe in a different social reality that has been obfuscated by acceptance of the dominant organizational and social assumptions, and can work for awareness and change. (10 references) (LMI)

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WOMEN AND PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION:

Invisibility and Discrimination

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine, within the context of school administration in public education, the assumptions of organizational and social reality and the phenomena of gender discrimination that they render invisible. Through examination of the experiences of women currently serving as administrators in public education, awareness of the possible need for reconstruction of perceptions about public education and public school administration shall emerge.

The importance of this study is the introspection it invites, the learning it enhances, and the evolution of new constructions it enables. This experience for the individual is inevitable; it must occur. For in the occurrence, the realities of life in public education and public school administration are revealed not only for what they espouse to be, but for what they can also be perceived to be.

The intent is not to bemoan situations or happenings, but to illustrate possible realities of public education and public school administration that they might mask.

WOMEN AND PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION:
Invisibility and Discrimination

Public schools employ all kinds of people: males/females, whites/people of color, old/young, single/married, and liberal/conservative. District and state reporting documents note many of these realities with numbers and percentages. Legislation protects groups and enables their serious representation in all educational organizations, at all organizational levels. Title IX, the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, Affirmative Action, and the civil rights acts guarantee equal representation and educational/occupational opportunities.

This reality of deeply embedded and largely unexamined assumptions about the social world of public education, this "construction of the inner eye," reflects a view of the world of education in which multiplicity, diversity and uniqueness are represented and cherished. This is the world that was described in the spring of 1987 when my female colleagues were graduating with new doctorates ready to embark upon careers in public school administration. They had all been told that anything was possible. They could do anything, try anything and be anything if they were willing to put forth enough effort.

This reality, however, was perceived through a conditioned "construction of their inner eye." The world they saw and "knew" was composed of "deeply embedded and largely unexamined assumptions" (Anderson, 1990, p. 38) about their world, public education and public school administration.

It is now the fall of 1990. Three full years have enabled my female public school colleagues to see anew the reality of the world of public education and public school administration. A new "construction of the inner eye" has evolved from their personal experiences. This construction can be termed a "heightened awareness," a "new awakening" in perspective or the

"inner eye" of viewing the tacit meaning of seemingly innocent events. A new reflective and critical construction has emerged from this self-reflection. From this new construction, they now believe and "know" that public schools prefer to employ administrators who are married white males. These administrators like people who look, live, and think like they do. Schools fight diversity and promote a myopic world view. The social realities of the 1960s and 1970s that fueled equity and equality enactments and legislation still exist. But, the national issues are no longer issues, not because the underlying problems have been solved, but because people believe, therefore see, social constructions/realities that do not exist.

The worlds described are the same worlds. Nothing has changed except the vision of those who were schooled to believe and live in one world but who found themselves in a world with a dramatically different reality. What was invisible before is now quite clear. Somehow they are able to construct a reality different from that constructed three years ago. They can now see differently. How that happened is of individual importance within their own specific careers and not of import in this study. What this new or awakened construction allows them to see is of general importance to others living in the world of public school administration and serves as the focus of this study.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine, within the context of school administration in public education, the dominant constructions of the inner eye, defined as the assumptions of organizational and social reality, and the social phenomena of gender discrimination that they consequently render invisible. Through an examination of the experiences of female colleagues in public school administration, various global, academic assumptions about life

in public education and public school administration will be challenged. Through analysis of the inner eye and challenging of ingrained perceptions, a different reality of public education and public school administration can be revealed.

Theoretical Frame

According to Anderson (1990), denial and institutionalization of organizational and social realities result in the invisibility of organizational phenomena and their redefinition as non-issues or their classification as "non-events." These actions or "constructions of our inner eyes" collectively permit us not to see certain social phenomena. By asking the questions "what counts as knowledge?" and "how is what counts as knowledge organized and transmitted?," these social constructions may be illuminated (Bates, 1980; Smyth, 1989).

Questions posed in terms of "what counts" rather than "what constitutes" or "what is" illustrate the conflictual nature of meaning in educational organizations. As Bates (1980) points out, what "counts" as meaning is determined within organizational and social contexts and

because administrators in most organizations are in a better position to influence what "counts" as knowledge than other organizational members, they are to a great extent the managers of organizational meaning, the custodians of organizational legitimacy, and the definers of organizational and social reality. (Anderson, 1990, p. 43)

Critical theory offers a way in which to see a variety of organizational and social contexts and their conflictual meanings.

Critical theory provides an attitude, a way of conceptualizing reality, and a way of addressing social change through individually formulated actions. It does not prescribe; it does not determine; rather, it

attempts to educate, and in so educating attempts to introduce us to our surroundings and how they consciously or unconsciously influence us.

(Foster, 1986, p. 90)

Constructivist theory focuses on stakeholder claims, concerns, and issues as organizers. The stakeholders are groups at risk; they are open to exploitation, disempowerment and disenfranchisement. But, they use the information generated through constructivist inquiry to their benefit, and they learn from it (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Critical constructivist theory will serve as the lens through which the exploration of legitimate and dominant constructions of the inner eye concerning women in public school administration will occur. In this way, the assumptions about organizational and social realities of public school administration and the gender issues that they render invisible can be seen in a variety of ways - for what they espouse to be as well as by women in public school administration.

Procedures

Method

The method of choice for the constructivist is qualitative, for it assumes multiple realities dependent on the time and context of the constructors who hold them. "The human is the instrument of choice for the constructivist.... Objections that humans are subjective, biased, or unreliable are irrelevant, for there is no other option" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 175). Methods include "talking to people, observing their activities, reading their documents, assessing the unobtrusive signs they leave behind, responding to their non-verbal cues, and the like" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, pp. 175-176).

Specifically, this paper is the result of the analysis of over a dozen vignettes that reflect the professional and administrative experiences of women in public education. The vignettes depict the assumptions of administrative life in public education that are considered "traditionally accepted" and "typical or natural," yet at the same time illustrate interpretations which render gender issues "invisible" and ultimately discriminate against women. Four of the vignettes will be reported herein.

These familiar realities illustrate the heart of the problems experienced by women aspiring to administration in public education. They reflect disparities in selection and screening, roles, access to information and gender visibility.

Data Sources

Female colleagues, aspiring public school administrators, practicing elementary and secondary school principals and assistant principals and district superintendents, have provided the vignettes presented in this paper. They are from small rural districts, large urban districts and range in age from 28 to 45. They have audited their own scenarios and served as member checks for all others.

Points of View

It must be remembered that:

A paradigm is a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world. As such, paradigms are deeply embedded in the socialization of adherents and practitioners: paradigms tell them what is important, legitimate, and reasonable. Paradigms are also normative, telling the practitioner what to do without the necessity of long existential or epistemological considerations. But it is this aspect of paradigms that constitutes both their strength and

their weakness - their strength in that it makes action possible, their weakness in that the very reason for action is hidden in the unquestioned assumptions of the paradigm. (Patton, 1980, p. 203)

The organizational and social constructions of public school administration can be interpreted differently. Some interpretations render gender discrimination invisible, others illustrate the various ways in which it exists. The readers of this paper will encounter again a familiar reality or meet for the first time invisibility and discrimination. Through vicarious experiences, they will be introduced to "new information and new levels of sophistication that can, with a little effort and assuming only good intention on the part of the reader, lead to a reconstruction, perhaps even a radical one, of the reader's original construction" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 181).

It is awareness of the possibility of reconstruction that is the merit of this paper.

Findings

The past and present constructions of the inner eye, new realities of public education, public school administration and related organizational assumptions, illustrate disparities. These disparities occur in a variety of areas such as selection and screening, roles, access to information and gender visibility.

For ease of presentation, the occurrences will focus on particular assumptions. Experiences will be described briefly in two different ways. First they will be analyzed in terms that reflect "this is the way it seems to be here and how I fit within it." Then, the same experiences will be analyzed with a different and gendered "construction." The first presentation reflect the way it seems and the second illustrates the way it can be interpreted within the "awakened inner eye."

The intent is not to bemoan situations or happenings, but to illustrate possible realities of public education and public school administration that they might mask. Which realities exist are debatable. Those who have lived masked discrimination or conditioned invisibility will recognize it; those who have not may learn to see differently.

Organizational overview

Within every organization there is a hierarchy. When teachers enter the organization, they are at the bottom. They know that if they are capable, over time, they will rise, they will receive tenure and they will make a positive difference in the lives of many children. When public school administrators enter the organization, they know that if they are capable, over time, they will rise, they will be promoted from assistant principal to principal and even superintendent. They will move from a small school to a bigger one, and they will make positive differences in the lives of many children and teachers.

In sum, if an administrator does the right things, the right things will be his/hers; the norms and policies of public education dictate this. Duties, opportunities, expectations and responsibilities will be equitable, eventually.

This description reflects what we have been told, indirectly and directly. We "know" this to be true. The organizational manifestations of equality, equity, fairness and honesty will be exercised for each of us. We are protected by policy, constitutional amendments, law and mandates. These institutionalized realities and organizational constructs give us every reason to believe this reality. These are the global, academic working hypotheses (Crowson, 1987) about our world that guide expectations, questions and understandings. They also reflect what "counts" in public school

administration. Honesty, integrity, results, and a focus on children are the standards by which our progress will be judged.

The following assumptions about life in public school administration reflect other realities that the female administrators experiencing them now "know" (realities that reflect what "counts") about their world. These alternative working hypotheses have grown from a synthesis of a variety of experiences and different people. The common thread in them is the redefinition of what is "known" and what "counts." These new assumptions about public education and public school administration some will call less-likely truths. We have all been told that we should think so because the plausibility of their existence questions the traditional and institutionalized "known" world. The subjects assert that these new assumptions might be truth and the institutionalized world less-likely realities.

Selection/screening/hiring practices

One of my colleagues is currently finishing her doctorate in public school administration, is married to a school administrator and is serving as a first year principal at an elementary school in a rural district near her home. She is clearly focused in her views of public education and public school administration, soft spoken yet firm in her beliefs, very good looking, and eager to "have an elementary school of my own."

Last spring, she was the assistant principal at the same elementary school when her principal was hired away to a neighboring state and the search began for a new elementary principal. She applied along with 15 male candidates. In his search for a new principal, the male superintendent approached faculty at the nearby university for recommendations of "exceptional" candidates for the position. She was highly recommended for the

position by three well-respected faculty from the university where she is a candidate in the doctoral program. Following the deadline date, he carefully screened all candidates and narrowed the pool to two: this female who is the current assistant principal and one candidate from outside the district.

The assistant principal was called into the superintendent's office twice for one-on-one in-depth interview sessions. The first interview focused on her reasons for wanting the position and the appropriateness of her qualifications. At the second interview the superintendent brought up on his computer a file containing a log of past actions, happenings and specific occurrences with which she was involved at the elementary school. She was asked to explain each situation and justify her responses. Some occurrences involved him directly, others involved staff, support personnel, parents and school children. A week later she was interviewed by the board.

She and the outside candidate were asked to attend the next board meeting. At that meeting, a vote was taken in open session and she was elected the new elementary school principal.

Prior to applying for and getting this principalship, she believed that she could and would be considered a viable candidate for the position of principal at the elementary school in which she was assistant principal. One of the important social constructions associated with public schools and their administration is the concept of "protected opportunity." It is believed and proclaimed that fairness, impartiality and examination of individual worth are the rules by which the hiring and screening processes are conducted. She would have as good a chance as anyone else for the position. In fact, she might even be considered the "favorite" because of her knowledge of the district, faculty and staff.

The old global, academic construction of her inner eye was that her worth as an administrator would stand on her record in that district at that elementary school. The new awakened construction is that her worth was countered by her gender. The other finalist did not receive such careful scrutiny; he was not female; he was less-known. She was "grilled;" she was female; she was well-known. The invisible construct of gender bias was not visible in the global, academic construction, but was clear in the new awakened perspective.

More than one rationale for behaviors in this vignette can be posited. The global, academic explanation could be that vigorous screening occurred because of the need to check a possible mis-match of personalities, administrative styles and organizational objectives. An equally likely explanation, reflecting an awakened construction, could be that her superintendent would have preferred to work with a male elementary principal and was searching for reasons to eliminate her from the competition. This new construction is not a pleasant one because gender is virtually impossible to change. From this new perspective, it would be impossible for her to be seen as a viable administrator in this district, no matter what she did. The literature has often noted that women should be women and not try to dress, act or administrate like men (Shakeshaft, 1989). The dilemma for this female was real. It almost blocked her rise to the principalship in this district. She believes that it has blocked her success and her future in this district. She has just recently been asked to resign by the superintendent. She has agreed. The battle has been fought and the superintendent won. The war is not over, however. She is looking for another principalship.

She does not believe her experiences are typical, but she does believe that they were based in great part upon her gender. The difference appears to

be between how the traditional academic construct of the realities of hiring and the subsequent lens through which she now views the world. It is possible that she has not constructed a truly plausible reality for herself in that school district. It is also possible that the reality she now sees does exist.

Roles

In a nearby district, another principal has been adjusting to her new position as a building level administrator. At the end of her first year of administration, selection of faculty to replace retiring and vacant positions was needed. Her male superintendent was eager to help her in this administrative task. His suggestions for screening candidates for the physical education position were consistent with state department requirements for certification but included an additional item: gender. The superintendent told this 5 foot 4 inch, 110 pound female that "you need a man in your building, someone who could deal with discipline problems. You couldn't possibly deal with some of those big 6th graders yourself."

This occurrence questions various traditional roles of the elementary principal. The first is disciplinary competence. Implicit is the assumption that size and gender are determining factors in successful discipline. This has not been the primary outcome of research on discipline (Tanner, 1977).

The second organizational assumption questioned here is that of administrative paternalism. The male superintendent, the father figure, wants to help his new female principal, the naive daughter. Having a male in the building would ease his mind.

The third organizational issue being questioned is gender. Since the turn of the century, the number of women in administrative positions in public schools has decreased remarkably. The new dominance of the male administrator

has been maintained since the early 1970s and at the elementary school principal level, has continued to increase (Shakeshaft, 1989).

A social construction of equality and equity that is different from that traditionally defined is obvious. The new construct generated by the principal in this vignette is that of women being able to do a satisfactory job, but men being able to do all aspects of the job in better ways. She had not known this before. A redefinition of what counts in administration has occurred for her. A different vision of life in administration in public education had emerged from this interpretation: Women are equal, but men are more equal.

This principal does believe her experiences are typical, and she believes that they were based in great part upon her gender. Again, the difference is in how we construct our realities and the lenses through which we view our world. It is possible that she has not constructed a truly plausible reality. It is also possible that the reality she sees does exist.

Access to information

A colleague recently noted the litany required of her at district level administrator meetings in a large metropolitan school district. Simply stated, if she wanted access to information she would need to "be friendly." She began her story by stating: "It has been my experience that access to information is limited to males or females willing to flirt with or hang out with the guys. If females want information they need to be friendly."

The range of activities associated with "being friendly" was wide and diverse. It could be as much as a hug in the hall prior to the start of the meeting or it could be as time consuming as an evening of socializing and dancing following the meetings. Her specific experience involved being included (or not included) in the routing of information about grant

deadlines. She did not hug, pat on the back, exchange jokes, or socialize and dance during the evening and believes that because of her "unfriendly iron maiden stance" she was left off the routing slip.

This oversight she believes happens all the time. Frequently, after the fact, she receives information about happenings that she should have known about. The size of the district could be one explanation of the loss of information within bureaucratic channels. It could also be that she was inadvertently omitted. She believes that because she does not play the "friendly" female colleague, she is left out of an organizational information loop. Only those with friendly ties to other administrators are privy to all that is going on.

The traditional organizational construct of equal access to information is redefined by this female administrator as the new awakened construct of friendly access. She now knows that if she wants access to certain pieces of information or needs to know the ropes, she needs to be chummy with the males either before the meetings started or at the evening social sessions. Her distaste for the needed closeness, and her decision not to engage in those happenings, resulted in her exclusion from routing lists district-wide and ultimately "demerits" because of missed due dates for district reports and grant proposal deadlines.

The traditional organizational construct of equal access to information is another interesting institutionalized belief based upon the predominance of notification guidelines, advertising policies and other formal organizational protocols. However, repeatedly the information chain for this female administrator was broken and she was eliminated or excluded. In her attempt to understand these occurrences, she has redefined the traditional organizational construct of equal access. She now refers to the new construct

as equal access for the males and friendly females. This perspective is noticeably gendered and possibly undeserved, but for this female administrator it is the most reasonable explanation of the occurrences in this vignette.

Visible gender

Administrators meet at least once a year for state and national administrator meetings. These meetings are replete with opportunities to be updated on the newest of the new, to become reacquainted with old friends, to hear about newly opened and opening positions state-wide, and to access all sorts of information that could ease administrative tasks and duties. Information about new technologies circulates and innovative curriculum ideas abound as well.

Administrators who attend these meetings note the predominance of men in attendance and a dearth of women; three piece suites abound and dresses are seldom seen. When asked to comment on the gender attendance patterns at these meetings, a female elementary principal recently said:

You know, things have really improved in the past 10 years. You should have seen it back then, there were virtually no women in attendance.

Now when I go to elementary administrator meetings, almost half of the principals there are female.

This statement within the global, academic construct of administration as a predominately male profession sounds heartening. From someone who should know, a female administrator with 10 years tenure, the picture is one in which the numbers of women are rising up to 50%, women are being placed in administrative positions and are attending professional administrator meetings. The picture can be broadened to include the positive elements of building networks within the profession and actively creating a future for themselves and others of like gender.

This view is based upon the rosy perspective of the glass of female administrators being half full. It is nice and good to see a rise in the number of female elementary principals. But, given the statistics associated with gender and elementary teaching, the picture presented is distorted and rather naive. Almost 80% of elementary teachers nationally are female, yet a mere 20% of elementary principals are female (Shakeshaft, 1989).

One explanation of the 50/50 vision at elementary administrator meetings is that female principals are attending administrator meetings with greater regularity than their male counterparts. Another explanation is that the men have chosen not to attend these meetings because they can and do conduct their business elsewhere. For many women, the golf course is believed to be the new locale. When the population attending the meeting changes, change the meeting location. This explanation is not as rosy a picture.

A look at this vignette from a glass being half empty perspective is equally illuminating. Over the past 25 years a push has been made public education to bring women and minorities into the administrative ranks. The easiest level at which to achieve this goal is that of elementary principal because there are more females to recruit and select from. Despite this press for entry of women into administrative positions, the number of females in elementary principalships is still approximately 20% nationally.

This vignette points out the false euphoria experienced by many women when they see more and more of like individuals in administrative positions. This vignette also points out the typical reality of the global, academic construction of non-discrimination. The female colleague referred to in this vignette does not believe she has been discriminated against. And, when you have not been discriminated against you may not be able to see discrimination around you. Any gain in the number of females in administrative positions is

positive, but within the history of administration in public education and the loss of so much ground in the 1950s, it could take another 50 years to gain stature back.

What was invisible before now can be seen clearly. The new awakened construct is that of women, as well as men, not seeing the need to examine issues associated with gender discrimination. If this is true, we have a long, long way to go.

Importance of the study

The importance of this study is the introspection it invites, the learning it enhances and the evolution and awakening of constructions of the inner eye it enables. Through the experiences of these colleagues, others may be able to see and then construct their own awakened lenses for viewing themselves and public education or their own lenses may become clearer, even evolve. What and how they see will be different from what these women describe. They will see an equally real world, because what they see will be of their own construction, based upon their experiences and their sense of their world.

Aside from the clarification of lenses and construction, it is hoped that the power of the individual in public school administration can be demonstrated through these experiences. People, if they can see differently, can believe a different reality and work for awareness and change. Great freedom ensues from this concept. If seeing is believing, then believing may also lead to seeing and, ultimately, awareness (Lotto, 1981). We make our realities; therefore, we can also change them. If we can see discrimination, we may be able to combat it. But, we need to be able to recognize the possibility of its existence first.

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